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RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000321

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS RECOMMENDATIONS
MADE BY UN RAPPORTEUR ON RELIGION

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his "profound belief" that in every religion, family is considered holy. He said the Jehovah's Witnesses make mistakes about Turkmen mentality and destroys the family. They recruit a wife and her husband is not happy, or they invite children to become Jehovah's Witnesses without their parents' permission. According to Gurbanov, these conflicts involve not only ethnic Turkmen, but also Russians and adherents of other religions. He mentioned that the CRA receives petitions with people's complaints about such activities. He was surprised how the Jehovah's Witnesses have reached even the most distant villages. Gurbanov also mentioned Bahai and Krishna groups, which have been registered. Ashgabat was the location of the first Bahai church, established in the late nineteenth century by Bahai refugees from present-day Iran. The church was destroyed in the 1948 earthquake and replaced with a monument to Turkmen poet Magtumguly.

17. (SBU) Gurbanov expressed that view that all religious groups, registered or not, should respect the laws of the country "because it is the country that feeds them." He said if the Government registered the Jehovah's Witnesses, people would not understand because the Jehovah's Witnesses "do not respect Turkmenistan's laws." He noted disapprovingly that the Jehovah's Witnesses refuse blood transfusions, adding that, in his personal opinion, the Government cannot register that group. The Charge explained some of the challenges that Jehovah's Witnesses faced historically in the United States in attempting to practice their religion, citing refusal to pledge allegiance to the flag and military service. Nonetheless, over time U.S. courts resolved these issues in a manner that respected religious convictions. Gurbanov said the United States has had 250 years to resolve these issues,

while Turkmenistan is still very young as a nation.

TURKMENISTAN: NEED TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN CULTURE AND RELIGION

¶8. (SBU) Mufti Rowshen Allaberdiyev shared his views on the particular features of Islam in Turkmenistan, stressing the importance of distinguishing between the customs and traditions of the Turkmen people, on the one hand, and Islam on the other, in order to avoid misunderstandings. In the Arab world, cultural practices and religion are integrated. This is not the case in Turkmenistan. For example, among Turkmen, the third, seventh and fortieth days following a death are commemorated, but this practice is cultural, not religious. Many people in Turkmenistan do not read prayers, but are not ostracized. However, if a person does not observe the appropriate days following a death, that person would be ostracized.

¶9. (SBU) The Mufti said that clergy in Turkmenistan are taught to respect all other religious communities. If someone publicly says that they do not respect another religion, that person will be ostracized. According to the Mufti, Muhammed taught that if another religion does not create an obstacle for Islam, then co-existence is fine. In the Koran, the Mufti noted that Allah had created men and women and separated them into different nationalities and religions in order for them "to visit and become friends." The Mufti explained the Turkmen perspective on Islam, that if Turkmen traditions are not respected, then people will not be happy. He noted that the Turkmen population is predominantly Muslim, and that their respect for Islam can be observed by visiting a mosque on a Friday and seeing how many people attend Friday prayers.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN TURKMENISTAN

¶10. (SBU) Concerning the education of Islamic clergy, the Mufti said during Soviet times, the issue of institutional religion was not considered. Upon independence, Turkmen authorities chose the Turkish system as the most acceptable

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version. In 1994, a Religion Faculty was established at Turkmenistan State University. Its task was to teach not only religion, but also Turkmen customs and traditions. The imams that serve in the mosques are trained at the university. They are taught not only Islam, but also all aspects of religion in order to facilitate understanding between religious groups. The Mufti said all imams in the provinces are graduates of the university program. Previously, half the imams were from the elder generation and half were younger, but the new generation has been fully brought in during the last two years. He added that there are no madrassahs in Turkmenistan. There were madrassahs previously, but they could not find enough positions for the graduates, so the madrassahs were closed. According to the Mufti, the university meets the current need for clergy. The Mufti said there are not many requests to establish madrassahs, but if they receive more such requests, they will consider it in the future.

"NO OBSTACLES" FOR REGISTRATION OF TWO CHURCHES

¶11. (C) The Charge raised the cases of the Iman Yoly (Path of Faith) and Svet Zhizni (Light of Life) churches that have been trying to obtain registration. Gurbanov was instantly familiar with both groups, saying that the CRA had "helped them a lot" and that they are the "most ready" for registration. He noted that there was a bureaucratic process, but believed that there were "no obstacles." He said the Commission on Religion and Public Organizations at the Ministry of Justice now had action on the matter.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: While CRA Chairman Seryayev attended the meeting and, while he seemed to follow the conversation with

interest, he did not speak at any point, instead allowing Gurbanov to do all the talking on behalf of the CRA. Although he might have been uncomfortable speaking in Russian, the Mufti made his comments in Turkmen, which the Chairman could also have done. In speaking with contacts among the minority religious groups, Gurbanov's name is frequently mentioned as their contact, or as the source of various comments, suggesting that Gurbanov plays an active role in the functioning of the CRA. Our contacts have shared varying views on Gurbanov, with some saying he is supportive, while others suggesting that he holds personal views that are unacceptable for an official in his position. In his conversation with the Charge, when he would be at his most "diplomatic," his comments about Jehovah's Witnesses suggested a strong antipathy. We've also been told he would refuse to accept women or invalids as church leaders. Still, his comments about the Government's approval of the Special Rapporteur's recommendations were encouraging, offered with a hint of the respect that anything UN-related seems to muster with the Turkmenistan Government. The comment about the prospects for registration of the two church groups was encouraging, especially if their long wait and repeated submissions can finally come to a favorable end. Still, there are equally worthy groups also waiting for registration, so hopefully if and when the good news comes, there will be additional beneficiaries as well. END COMMENT.

MILES